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IN A SOCIETY WHERE MUTANTS AND FORMER MUTANTS ALIKE FEEL THREATENED BY THE WORLD AROUND THEM, THEY TURN TO THEIR FIRST, BEST LINE OF DEFENSE WHENEVER TROUBLE ARISES: X-FACTOR, THE PRIVATE DETECTIVE AGENCY FOUNDED BY MADROX, THE MULTIPLE MAN.

X-FACTOR

PREVIOUSLY...

X-FACTOR SUCCEEDED IN THEIR MISSION TO REUNITE THE MISSING ARMANDO MUNOZ, A.K.A. "DARWIN," WITH HECTOR MUNOZ, A.K.A. "DARWIN'S DAD." AND IT ALL ENDED HAPPILY EVER AFTER EXCEPT, WELL, NOT SO MUCH, AS HECTOR TURNED HIS SON OVER TO A MYSTERIOUS ORGANIZATION SIMPLY KNOWN AS THE KARMA PROJECT IN EXCHANGE FOR WHAT HE THOUGHT WAS A HEALTHY PAYOFF...EXCEPT DARWIN'S KIDNAPPER PAID HIM OFF WITH A BULLET IN THE BRAIN. THE TIMELY ARRIVAL OF LONGSHOT, HOWEVER, PUT THE TEAM ON THE SUPPOSEDLY COLD TRAIL AS HIS TELEMETRIC POWERS GAVE THEM A LEAD TO THE VAN THAT HAULED DARWIN AWAY. MEANWHILE MADROX WAS HORRIFIED TO SEE THAT AN ACCIDENTALLY CREATED AND OUTRAGED DUPE NEARLY KILLED THE COMATOSE HECTOR IN REVENGE FOR HECTOR'S BETRAYAL, AND ABSORBED HIM JUST IN TIME.

MEANWHILE, MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, CAROLINE, HAS NOT ONLY STARTED KINDERGARTEN, BUT HAS A BRAND NEW FAVORITE TV SERIES: "BEN 10" AND ITS SEQUEL, "BEN 10: ALIEN FORCE." SHE DANCES TO THE THEME SONG AND LIKES TO USE HER OMNITRIX (ACQUIRED IN TOYS R US) TO TRANSFORM INTO WILD MUTT AND LEAP AROUND THE LIVING ROOM GROWLING. WHICH IS FINE EXCEPT WHEN WE HAVE TO WALK HER.

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WUMF
WUMF
WUMF
WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH?

THE BIG BANG

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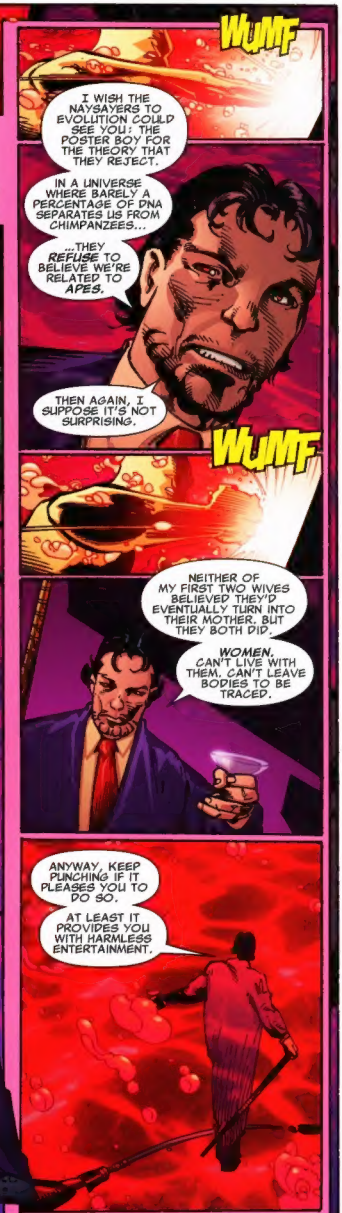


WUM-KRAK
SON OF A--
SECURITY ALERT!
HE'S LOOSE! THE MUTANT IS LOOSE!

LISTEN TO ME, SON...
DON'T CALL ME SON! YOU'RE NOT MY FATHER!
NO. OBVIOUSLY NOT.
I AM MERELY YOUR CAPTOR. NOT YOUR BETRAYER.
THE MAN WHO SPAWNED YOU TURNED YOU OVER TO US...
...FOR HALF A MILLION DOLLARS.
I DON'T BELIEVE IT.
WHAT? THE BETRAYAL?
OR THAT HE LET YOU GO FOR SUCH A RELATIVELY LOW SUM?
HONESTLY: HALF A MILLION? THAT WON'T EVEN BUY A THIRTY-SECOND SPOT ON THE SUPER BOWL.
WHERE'S MY FATHER? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HIM?
HE IS NO LONGER A FACTOR IN THIS EQUATION.
WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?
IT MEANS THAT AT THIS MOMENT HE'S LIKELY DWELLING IN THE NINTH CIRCLE OF HELL WITH OTHER TRAITORS.
HE'S DEAD, ARMANDO. NOW...

...KINDLY SURRENDER WHILE WE PREPARE A NEW TANK FOR YOU.
ARMANDO?
ARMANDO, HE'S NOT WORTH IT. HE'S REALLY--
RRRIAHAARR!

PLOOSH
I'M SORRY ABOUT THIS, ARMANDO. I KNOW YOU'RE GRIEVING.
SO IT HARDLY SEEMS THE TIME TO DOUSE YOU WITH A CONCOCTION WE'VE DERIVED FROM YOUR OWN DNA.
SOMETHING DESIGNED TO INCAPACITATE YOU WHILE CONSTANTLY MUTATING ITSELF...
...SO THAT YOUR PECULIAR ABILITIES WILL BE HELPLESS TO THWART IT.
FORTUNATELY FOR YOU, THERE IS A WISE OLD SAYING: NEVER KICK A MAN WHEN HE'S DOWN.
I'VE NEVER BEEN ONE FOR OLD SAYINGS.
UNNFFFFI

AMAZING, REALLY. YOU DEVELOPED SUPER-STRENGTH AS NEEDED TO BREAK FREE OF YOUR CONSTRAINTS.
HERE'S THE THING: WE AT KARMA ARE ALWAYS GOING TO BE ONE STEP AHEAD OF YOU.
GENTLEMEN...
...DRIVE THE POINT HOME.
I SAID THAT'S E--
ALL RIGHT, GENTLEMEN. THAT'S ENOUGH.

KNOK KNOK
MR. STEFANI?
YES?
OWNER OF A VAN, LICENSE NUMBER MKA-213?
YYYYESSSSS...
COULD WE TALK FOR A FEW MINUTES? HERE'S OUR CARD.
XF INVESTIGATIONS? WHAT'S XF STAND FOR?
OUR BOSS, XANDER FORBUSH. MAYBE YOU HEARD OF HIM. USED TO WORK FOR REMINGTON STEELE.
OH. UHM... OKAY. SURE. COME ON IN.

CAN I GET YOU BOYS A BEER?
NOT AT THE MOMENT. SO, THE VAN...
HAVEN'T SEEN IT IN MONTHS.
IT'S BEEN STOLEN?
WELL, I HAVEN'T REPORTED IT AS SUCH, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE GETTING AT.
PARDON MY ASKING, SON, BUT...DID STEROIDS DO THAT TO YOU?
THIS? NAH.
SEE, WHEN I WAS A KID MY MOM GOT ME A THIGH MASTER, BUT I USED IT UPSIDE DOWN AND, WELL...VEE-OLA.
VEE-OLA?
HE MEANS "VOILA!" ANYWAY, THE VAN...?
OH, RIGHT. RIGHT. MY SON HAS IT.
YOUR SON?
MY SON PAULIE, YEAH.
HE ASKED IF HE COULD "BORROW" IT, HAVEN'T SEEN IT, OR HIM, SINCE. AND I COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO CALL THE COPS ON MY OWN KID, Y'KNOW?
ANY IDEA WHERE HE, OR THE VAN, ARE NOW?
NONE. SORRY I CAN'T BE OF MORE HELP.

YOU TAKE CARE NOW!
CLAW
IT'S STEFANI. WE'VE GOT A PROBLEM.
A COUPLE OF PRIVATE DETECTIVES WERE HERE ASKING AFTER THE VAN. NO, I DON'T KNOW WHY...
BUT ONE OF THEM WAS PRETTY OBVIOUSLY STRONG GUY, AND I'LL BET *ANYTHING* THE OTHER WAS THE MULTIPLE MAN.
MUNOZ MUST HAVE HIRED THEM TO TRACK DOWN HIS SON, AND NOW THEY MUST'VE BEEN PULLED BACK IN WHEN WE TOOK OUT MUNOZ.
DITCH THE VAN--IN LAKE MICHIGAN, IN A SCRAP YARD-- I DON'T *CARE*, BUT *DITCH* IT.
NO, I'M NOT COMING THERE. I'M *HOT* NOW. MY GUESS IS, THEY'LL BE WATCHING ME, AT LEAST FOR A WHILE...

GOOD GUESS.
H-HOW...?
I WAS HERE THE WHOLE TIME, TELLING YOUR MIND TO LOOK THROUGH ME.
KIND OF LIKE THE SHADOW. NEAT. HUH.
WHO--?
YOU RECOGNIZE MADROX AND GUIDO, BUT NOT ME?
IT'S A WORLD GONE MAD, I SWEAR TO--
BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM

HELLO.
OOOOFF!

I... WAIT...
"WAIT"!?
I CAN'T! THEY'LL KILL ME!
YOU JUST PUT SIX HOLES IN A LOUIS VUITTON SHIRT AND YOU EXPECT ME TO "WAIT"?
FOR WHAT? THE FASHION POLICE?
TELL ME WHERE DARWIN'S BEING HELD.
WHEN I GET THROUGH WITH YOU, YOU'LL BE BEGGING THEM TO.
LET HIM GO, MONET!
JAMIE, CALM DOWN...
DON'T HURT HIM!
HE TRIED TO KILL ME!
IF YOU'D BEEN THE TARGET, HE'D HAVE SUCCEEDED.
JUST PUT HIM DOWN!
OH, ALL RIGHT, FINE!

SLAM!
GREAT. HE'S UNCONSCIOUS.
WELL, I WAS ANNOYED.
IF YOU'D GIVEN ME A FEW MINUTES TO CALM DOWN, I'D HAVE RESTRAINED MYSELF.
WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM, ANYWAY, MADROX?
OHHH, NOTHING. JUST THAT ONE OF MY DUPES NEARLY KILLED DARWIN'S FATHER IN HIS HOSPITAL BED AND I'M STILL FREAKED ABOUT IT.
AND WHOSE FAULT IS THAT?
MORDEZ-MOI.
NO PROBLEM.
EXCEPT NOW WE CAN'T QUESTION HIM.
I CAN TRY A MIND SCAN. BE EASIER IF HE WERE CONSCIOUS, THOUGH.
HOLD ON. I FOUND HIS WALLET. MEN TEND TO CARRY THOSE WITH THEM WHEREVER THEY GO.
LET ME SEE WHAT I CAN PICK UP.

LONGSHOT... WHAT ARE YOU SEEING? ANYTHING?
WEST AVE
I SEE THE VAN, TURNING ONTO A STREET CALLED WEST AVENUE.
THERE'S A WAREHOUSE. HOLD ON...
STEFANI'S AT THE WHEEL. IT'S DEFINITELY THE SAME VAN THAT PROVE OFF WITH DARWIN.
SO, GREAT! SINCE YER THERE, GRAB DARWIN OUTTA THE BACK OF THE VAN!
GUIDO, YOU GREAT PILLOCK, IT'S A VISION. HE DOESN'T HAVE A GENUINE PHYSICAL PRESENCE THERE.
OH. RIGHT. SORRY, MONET. STILL NOT TOTALLY GETTING THIS WHOLE "READING" THING OF HIS.
WE'RE APPROACHING A WAREHOUSE.
ADDRESS?
NOT SEEING ANY.
WE'RE GOING IN.

THERE'S SOMEONE THERE. I THINK HE MAY BE IN CHARGE.
HE'S...
HE'S LOOKING AT ME!
YOU MEAN IN YOUR DIRECTION.
NO, JAMES, I MEAN AT ME. DIRECTLY!
THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!
I KNOW IT'S IMPOSSIBLE! I--
UNNHHH!!!!!
LONGSHOT! WHAT'S HAPPENING?!

MONET!
GET HIM OUT OF THERE!
GOOD THING RICTOR'S NOT HERE. HE'D BE JEALOUS.
HUNH. TALK ABOUT BEING IN THE MOMENT.
OF WHICH ONE?
...
YOU KNOW, I'M HONESTLY NOT SURE.

CAN I DO ANYTHING FOR YOU, TERRY?
YOU CAN STOP ASKING *EVERY FIVE MINUTES* IF YOU CAN DO SOMETHING FOR ME.
SORRY. I MEAN, I KNOW THAT MADROX WANTS SOMEONE HERE WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES...
...BUT WHY DOESN'T HE JUST LEAVE A DUPE?
BECAUSE THEY'RE NOT ALWAYS PREDICTABLE.
SO I'M PREDICTABLE. GOOD OLD BORING RICTOR.
THAT'S NOT WHAT I--
DING!
DOORBELL. I'LL GET IT.
RICTOR! WAIT. COULD YOU REACH THE DRAWER FOR M--?
AAAAAAND HE'S GONE.

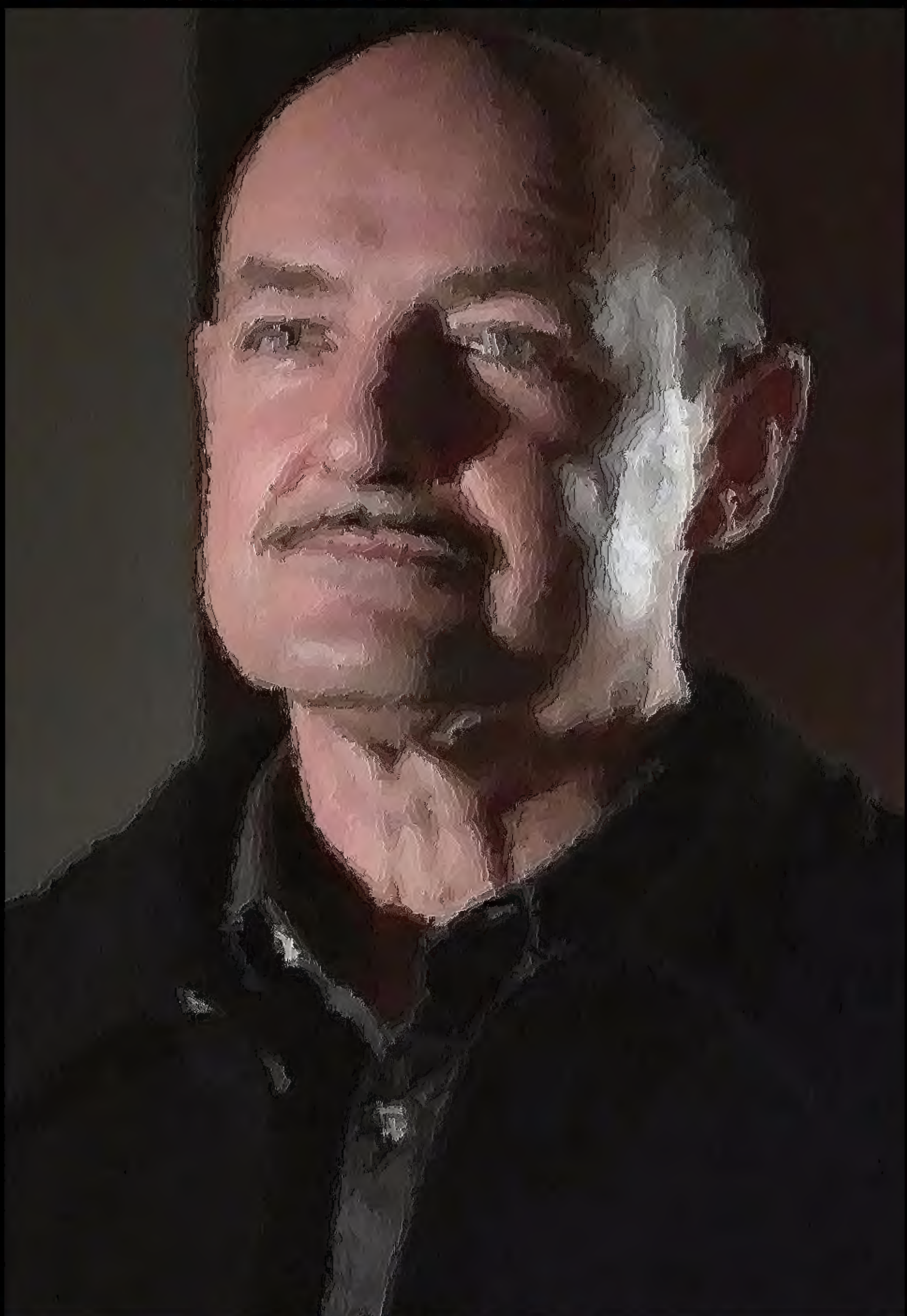
AAAAAAND I CAN'T STAND UP.
TERRIFIC. JUST TERRIFIC.
RICTOR! ANYONE! A LITTLE HELP?
THANK YOU. THANK YOU VERY--
--OH, CRAP.
HELLO, THERESA. VAL COOPER, O*N*E. WE CHATTED SOME MONTHS BACK...
...RIGHT BEFORE YOUR BOSS BLEW UP HIS HEADQUARTERS AND NEARLY TOOK MY TEAM AND ME WITH IT.
SO...
...LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR BABY.

OKAY. HERE'S WEST. TURNING RIGHT.
HOW COME SHE'S DRIVING? I ALWAYS DRIVE.
BECAUSE I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE ARGUING, AND ANYWAY, WHAT ARE YOU COMPLAINING ABOUT? I'M THE ONE GETTING CRUSHED.
MEBBE WE SHOULD'VE WAITED FOR STEFANI TO COME AROUND.
DON'T KNOW HOW LONG THAT WAS GOING TO TAKE. AND WITH DARWIN'S LIFE AT STAKE...
ANY OF THIS LOOK FAMILIAR?
ALL OF IT.
DO WE KNOW THAT IT'S AT STAKE?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
I MEAN MEBBE THEY GOT SOMETHIN' ELSE IN MIND FOR 'IM.
LIKE WHAT?
LIKE I DUNNO WHAT. SY RESEARCHED THE "KARMA PROJECT" THING AND CAME UP WITH A THERAPY GROUP, SOME HOLISTIC MEDICINE TYPES, AND AN INDIE ROCK BAND. SO WHO KNOWS WHAT THEY'RE UP T--
THERE! OVER THERE!
I'M ABSOLUTELY, REASONABLY, ALMOST FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT'S THE ONE!

LOCKED.
HOLD ON. I'VE GOT MY LOCK-PICK KIT RIGHT--
WAP
YEAH, THAT WAS SUBTLE.
I DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE GOIN' FOR SUBTLE.
DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE ANYONE HOME... "APPEAR" BEING THE OPERATIVE WORD.
STAY CLOSE BEHIND ME. AS CLOSE AS YOU WISH.
RIGHT.
AND BE READY FOR ANYTHING.
I ALWAYS AM.
"THEY'RE IN. REPEAT, THE MUTANTS ARE IN."
BLOW UP THE WAREHOUSE.

"WAREHOUSE BLOWN UP SIR."
TO BE CONTINUED...

DIGITAL COMICS PRESERVATION



"THERE IS NO FUTURE WITHOUT A PAST."

A PETER WATTS SCAN FOR DCP